

# *Living Life to the Max*

Penny Williams

Summer sun blazes down on the Arctic Bay, drenching the bay and its circling hills in radiance, throwing the whole scene into some kind of postcard-perfect visual overdrive. Backpackers lad their steps, gape at the view and count their travel dollars well spent. Dennis Shappa, who lives there—but never takes the view for granted, not for one minute—throws back his head and laughs. It's the laugh of an exuberant young man who loves life, has big goals and every year gets closer to them.

Six years ago, to the month, there was no laughter. "It happened in summer, 1992," he says. "Suddenly I had to rewrite a whole chapter in my life."

They found Dennis unconscious on the floor of the Northern Store, felled by a brain aneurism that didn't quite kill him, but certainly seemed to have done the next best thing. It robbed him of short-term memory. "Even three years ago, I still had to write everything down. Everything! 'Have your shower, brush your teeth,' things like that."

After initial treatment in the south, Dennis came home and attempted to return to high school. "I couldn't do it. I had headaches like a sledgehammer to the head every 10 seconds, and I was very depressed. I couldn't even breathe, I felt sorry for myself." I look at this relaxed, genial young man who has climbed mountains. I can't even imagine, and I ask how he did it, how he got past the anger.

"Well, the nurse at the clinic gave me Prozac for a while. That got me through the dark season. And I ran! I ran and I ran and I ran. And I wrote lots of letters and poems. That gave me an outlet." But, I push, you could have given up.

"After the accident, I had a whole new perspective. Also, my mother is a very spiritual person. I think she's the source of my strength."

The new perspective, and the inner strength, made Dennis someone who said Yes to life's possibilities. Further rehab in the south taught him to be well-organized. Yes. Books and writing, which he always avoided, suddenly beckoned. Yes. High school was out, but adult education was available, with instructor Barry Tibbett, right there in Arctic Bay. Yes. He could still plan and work toward a career. Yes!!

"They tested me and I entered at the 120 level, which is the equivalent to Grade 12. Now I've finished the 130 level and I'll start on 140 this fall. I need a 150 level to get into the Nunavut Teachers Education Program—that's my goal. I want to be a teacher." Not surprisingly, Dennis wins the best attendance award each year. "One hundred per cent last year!" And he flashes a huge grin.

This year, finally, Barry Tibbett is retiring from his work with Arctic College. Dennis' face clouds for a moment, measuring the loss of the man who has been friend and instructor, who encouraged and believed in him from the start. (And helped him become proud owner of seat F5-408 from the old Montreal Forum, but

that's another story.) Then he brightens again. "But now Kathy's coming back to town as instructor and I'll be working with her. I'm looking forward to that."

They already know each other. Kathy Okpik Oqallak (daughter of the acclaimed and much missed Abe and Rose Okpik) lived in Arctic Bay before moving with her husband and family to Nanisivik for five years. "Dennis has come such a long way," she says. "And he's so much fun. We always tease each other."

Laughter is certainly part of Dennis' recipe for building a new life. So is hard work. "I carry my day timer everywhere. I don't have to write down the basics anymore, but I still need it to keep myself organized. See? There's your name for this afternoon. And I have to read things over and over, more than most people."

In fact, keeping busy is at the heart of Dennis' message to others with disabilities, especially those now at the depressed and overwhelmed stage that he went through years ago. "Don't give up hope, keep being strong, pray to God. Work hard at your therapy, and keep busy. Don't just sit and feel sorry for yourself! Do something. Volunteer somewhere. When I was on the waiting list for adult Ed, I volunteered at the school. And I tell the elders, if ever you need help, call me. I'm glad to do it. If it weren't for the elders, where would we be?"

He also has a message for anyone who sometimes feels shy or awkward around someone with a disability. "Don't be afraid of us. Treat us like your brother or sister. And—be sure to include this. It's very important—don't take advantage of us." He explains how so-called friends did take advantage of him at first. It's a reminder that we owe justice to people with disabilities, as well as ordinary friendship.

Dennis lives the busy life he urges on others. School, volunteer work, some seasonal work this spring at the Nanisivik Mine (earning high praise), lots of reading through the N.W.T library service (books arrive with return postage paid), and his own output of letters and poems.

One of those poems, written after the road accident death of a little boy in town, seems to sum it all up. *Life Is So Precious* is the title, and it says, in part;

*Observe everything around you  
Take care of things that you've been putting  
aside saying you'll do them later.  
Maybe there won't be a later.  
Just try and be nice to people and hope for the  
best for you and people around you.*

It concludes: "And live life to the MAX."  
Just like Dennis Shappa.